

Senator Jon Tester

Chairman Akaka, thank you for having this hearing.

To the witnesses, and especially those National Guardsmen who will testify on Panel 2, thank you for being here and thank you for your service. It means a lot that you are here to visit with us today.

I particularly want to welcome Colonel Brad Livingston of the Montana Air National Guard. Colonel Livingston, thank you for your service and welcome back to Washington.

I look forward to a good discussion this morning with folks from DOD and the VA about what Montana and the other states represented here have done to take care of their Guardsmen.

I hope we can get some agreement from DOD and VA that some of these ideas can be standardized and implemented in the Reserves and across the state Guard units.

Members of the Guard and Reserve still face some pretty unique challenges when it comes to demobilization.

After a deployment that can last longer than a year, we give these folks a new mission: Getting back to their civilian lives in just one week.

That's one week to trade in a rifle for a civilian job. One week to try and put aside patrols and convoys for parenthood and carpools.

When the resumption of civilian life happens in a small town, hundreds of miles away from anybody else who knows what that soldier is going through, that can make the mission every bit as tough as the missions they have executed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The good news is that part of what makes our military so strong is that it is composed of citizen soldiers who find a way to do anything that is asked of them.

But we need to do a better job of helping those folks accomplish the demobilization mission.

To do that, we need to use every tool in the box.

And that's why I am so pleased that we have a number of state Guard units represented today to talk about what's worked - and what has not - for their Guardsmen.

The Montana National Guard has done some pretty interesting stuff when it comes to making the demobilization process work better for its troops.

They have been great leaders on this issue, and that is a real credit to the Adjutant General, Randy Mosley and a credit to Brad and his team.

I am proud that my state has been a leader on this issue. But I do think we need to remember something about Montana's experience.

It took the tragic suicide in 2007 of a young Guardsman named Chris Dana for folks to understand the scope of this problem.

We must not forget about the death of Specialist Dana, or the fact that we have lost dozens of veterans to suicide since the Afghanistan and Iraq wars began.

So, let me just say again how important this hearing is, and how important it is that we get this issue right. Our reservists, our Guardsmen and their families are counting on us for some real results.